

fort kaskaskia

STATE PARK AND MEMORIAL

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THE PARK

Fort Kaskaskia State Park is north of Chester off Route 3 in southern Illinois. It was incorporated into the Illinois Park System in 1927 as a memorial to the early French and American pioneers. The 250-acre park is in Randolph County.

Garrison Hill Cemetery: Prior to the time the area became a state park, the General Assembly, in 1891, appropriated \$10,000 to move the pioneers buried in three cemeteries in lowlands at the junction of the Mississippi and Kaskaskia rivers. The state purchased a 20-acre tract northwest and adjacent to the site of Fort Kaskaskia for the Garrison Hill Cemetery and moved these early burials when the old cemeteries were in danger of being washed away. A monument to these pioneers was erected in the center of the cemetery, which is now in the park.

HISTORY

Kaskaskia was founded in 1703 and soon attracted a sizable number of settlers and traders. Previously, the town was protected by a wooden stockade designed for Indian defense only. During the French and Indian War, fearing a British attack, the French inhabitants petitioned for a fort and offered to furnish materials for it. Their petition was granted.

Fort Kaskaskia, made of heavy palisades, was built on the bluff above and across from the town. There it stood until 1766, when the townspeople destroyed it rather than have it occupied by the British, to whom control had passed in 1765.

During the American Revolution, Gov. Patrick Henry of Virginia commissioned George Rogers Clark to lead an expedition into the territory. Clark assembled a company of Kentucky "Long Knives," sneaked past the garrison at Fort Massac on the Ohio River and marched across southern Illinois.

Conquer Fort Gage: The party reached Kaskaskia on July 4, 1778, and surprised the garrison at Fort Gage. A large stone building in Kaskaskia,



Fort Gage was formerly used by the Jesuits as a mission until the suppression of that order. Now turned into a barracks, Clark took the fort without firing a shot. The parish bell was rung to herald the new freedom and afterwards was known as the "Liberty Bell of the West." Thereupon the Illinois Country became a county of Virginia.

With the end of the Revolution, local government broke down and Kaskaskia was plunged into anarchy. In 1784, John Dodge, a Connecticut adventurer, and a group of desperadoes seized and fortified Fort Kaskaskia and terrorized the villagers for several years.

Under United States: In 1787, Illinois became a part of the Northwest Territory under the government of the United States. In 1809 the Illinois Territory was created and Kaskaskia became its capital. The town reached the peak of its importance in 1818 when it became the capital of the new state of Illinois.

Three rooms in the home of George Fisher were rented for use by the state and the first session

of the General Assembly was held there. Kaskaskia's decline began in 1820 when the capital was moved to Vandalia.

A flood nearly destroyed the town in 1844. The Mississippi River went on a rampage again in 1881, changing its course, moving eastward and then southwest to find its old channel. When the turbulence had subsided, an island had been created and a considerable portion of the first capital city had been washed away. Each recurring spring flood encroached further upon the site until the last vestige of Kaskaskia slipped into the Mississippi.

Overlook and Shelter Dedicated: The shelter house and overlook are on a high bluff where visitors get the best view of the site of old Kaskaskia. The blind poet, Louis William Rodenberg, composed a sonnet for each bronze tablet on the overlook triptych, which perhaps best describes the history of Kaskaskia. Historical plaques, also authored by Mr. Rodenberg, are mounted in the stone ends of the big shelter. These historical additions were dedicated in a ceremony in 1942.

FACILITIES

Picnicking: Scattered throughout the park are seven picnic areas with tables and park stoves in shaded spots convenient to parking areas. Drinking water is available. The large shelter house is popular for outings. There is no concession stand.

Summer Interpretive Program: This program is designed to provide activities to the visitor and relate him to his environment and natural resources.

Playgrounds: Two playground areas, one at each end of the park, accommodates both picnickers and campers.

Camping: There is a large camping area with vehicular access; also an overflow camping area with a small shelter. Groups of over 25 persons must have advance permission to enter the park. All campers need a permit from the park staff.

For more details about the park, contact Ranger, Fort Kaskaskia State Park, Ellis Grove, 62241, phone 618/859-3741.

Commemorating the vanished town, the state built a small brick building here to house the "Liberty Bell of the West;" now cracked, its mellow tones spoiled. Closely associated with the early history of Illinois, this old church bell was cast in France in 1741 for the congregation of the Catholic Church at Kaskaskia by King Louis XV of France. It required two years' time for the 650 pound bell to arrive in Illinois after being shipped to New Orleans and then towed up the Mississippi River by men walking along the river bank pulling ropes.

After its arrival in Kaskaskia over two centuries ago, the bell served under the flags of France, England and the United States. When Col. George Rogers Clark captured Kaskaskia from the British on the night of July 4, 1778, the bell, afterwards known as the "Liberty Bell of the West" pealed forth "long and loud." One side of the bell is ornamented with the royal lilies of France in relief. The other side bears a cross and pedestal, the top and arms of the cross terminating in grouped fleur de lis. French inscription translated: "For the church of Illinois—by the gift of the King."

Nearby is the historic Church of the Immaculate Conception, established in 1675, continuing without interruption since its founding, although the church building has been rebuilt several times using some materials and remnants of the old structure.

For more details about Kaskaskia Island, contact Custodian, R. R. 1, Box 34, St. Mary's, Missouri 63673, phone 618/366-2688.

NEARBY MEMORIALS

Pierre Menard Home: Adjacent to the park on a bluff overlooking the river and the sunken village is the home of Pierre Menard, presiding officer of the first Territorial Legislature and first Lieutenant Governor of Illinois in 1818. The Menard home was built in 1802 and was famous for its hospitality as well as its elegance. It has been preserved and is now a State Memorial. For more information write R. R. 1, Box 58, Ellis Grove, 62241; phone 618/859-3031.

Governor Bond Monument: The laws of 1881 approved an act appropriating \$1500 to erect a monument over the burial place of Shadrach Bond, the first governor of Illinois. It is on a four-acre plot in a cemetery on the north edge of Chester on Illinois Route 3.

Fort Kaskaskia State Memorial: The 14,000-acre Kaskaskia Island is the only community of Illinois west of the Mississippi. Although it is just about six miles above Chester, the only entrance by vehicle is through St. Mary's, Missouri, over a bridge that spans the Mississippi River. Sparsely populated, most of the residents farm for a livelihood.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION . . .

Admittance will not be granted groups of 25 or more persons to any state park or conservation area unless permission from the park ranger has been secured to use the facilities. It is also required that groups of minors have adequate supervision and that at least one responsible adult accompany each group not exceeding 15 minors. All pets must be on a leash.

Numerous state parks and memorials are within easy access of every part of the state. Lodges, cabins and dining rooms are important features of Illinois Beach, Starved Rock, Pere Marquette, White Pines Forest, Giant City and Black Hawk. Reservations for lodging should be made with lodge managers.

All state parks are open the year round. When weather conditions necessitate the closing of park roads during freezing and thawing periods, access to park facilities is by foot only.

Park Maps



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